

Istanbul Biennial: to problematize local urban transformation practice

By Tuba Parlak



Current view of the Taksim Square where tunnel diggings started a few months ago.

Istanbul has been undergoing a superimposed, new urbanization process for some time. The project reached its peak last year when public and private properties in various districts began to be evacuated and demolished with a “push-the-button” move of the ruling powers in order to be replaced by luxurious apartment blocks and shopping malls. Urban transformation is a painful process for the masses it eventually marginalizes. It is the acknowledgment of this fact that has led to activist outbursts against its application on various occasions. No one could expect the local art scene to remain silent in the face of what has gradually become one of the biggest issues of the whole country’s social and political agenda; and fortunately it did not.

Therefore, few people were surprised when Fulya Erdemci, the curator of the 13th Istanbul Biennial, announced the conceptual framework of her curation to be urban transformation. The biennial, which is to take place between September 14th and November 10th this year, will focus its gaze on civic rights issues stemming from this new urbanism model. The title of the 13th Istanbul Biennial is, “Mom, am I barbarian?”, which is a direct reference to Turkish poet Lale Müldür’s book of the same title. “The term ‘barbarian’ originates from the Ancient Greek word ‘barbaros’, which referred to the non-Greek populace and meant ‘foreigner or stranger’, or ‘those who cannot speak the language properly’. In the Middle Ages it also denoted non-

Christians, and later on non-Westerners. The word has always come to suggest an 'exclusion' despite the meaning it assumes in different contexts," said Erdemci. Having gained herself a well-deserved reputation for her curatorial work problematizing the public space, Fulya Erdemci's curatorial focus in making the biennial will be the notion of the public domain as a political forum. According to Erdemci, this highly contested concept will serve as a matrix to generate ideas and develop practices that question contemporary forms of democracy, challenge current models of spatio-economic politics, problematize given concepts of civilization and barbarity, and, most importantly, highlight the role of art in this context. "Neo-liberal urban policies advocate the implementation of free market parameters that lead to socio-economic Darwinism, which in turn creates a wilderness where the powerful beats the weak. Can't we imagine another form of social contract in which citizens assume responsibility for each other, even for the weakest ones, the most excluded? Through the unique interventions of artists the biennial exhibition aims to explore further into such pressing questions and will ask if art can foster the construction of new subjectivities to rethink the possibility of 'publicness' today," she said. Erdemci said that the Istanbul Biennial's ultimate target is to highlight the potential of the discourse of public domain through an examination of spatial justice, art in the public domain, and art-market relations. This, indeed, is a very indirect way of asking how art may respond to the ramifications of this new model of urbanism, or of inquiring if it simply prefers to overlook it, thus expressing comment on art-market relations. The upcoming biennial seems to be a multi-questioned exam where the exam-takers have little chance to cheat. On the flip-side of the same debate, another question claims our attention: does art really have to respond to or produce ideas about such issues? In my point of view, perhaps art hanging on the whitewashed walls of a gallery might have an escape from this obligation, but art presented in a public space cannot get off the hook as easily. But Erdemci's reasons for so strongly pressing the art world to throw themselves into the matter is due to her belief that art can raise good points, debates or questions concerning the issue at hand. As she states, "While artistic practices that claim public domain

become more prevalent, simultaneously under the spell of privatization, art institutions have become dependent on private funding and commercial support. As this increases, it has generated growing pains: in certain cases, the contemporary art world serves as the epicenter of the distribution of neoliberal culture and mechanisms. Our research for the Biennial extends to an investigation of how the 'booming' art world, specifically its market, functions in Istanbul and elsewhere, and what traces of this impact we might find. Because in the face of urgency, many artists joined the Occupy movement and many others support the struggles and reactions especially -but not exclusively- against neoliberal urban transformation, for example Sulukule Studio and Taksim Platform in Istanbul, or the Right to the City movement in Hamburg. Simultaneously, the discussion around the autonomy and instrumentalization of art has gained a momentum. My concern is to explore how art can be a part of this process of rethinking freedom and equality spatially, in terms of spatio-economic justice? Does art-as-public-domain and activism share the same goal of changing society? In the face of urgency, can art and its institutions be mobilized as a useful political tool? Or will art lose its power in the collision?"

The beginning of the end

In June 2005, Turkish parliament passed Law No. 5366 on the Protection and Renovation of 'Worn-out Cultural and Historical Property' which has since served as the legal basis for many of the urban transformation projects that started all across Istanbul. The legal procedure necessitates that first, local municipalities declare a property or a whole neighborhood as a renovation area and, after a quick process of some bureaucratic exchanges, a bid opens for candidate construction firms. The first execution was on Sulukule neighborhood in Istanbul's Fatih district, which is known to be a Roma settlement. The project included building expensive and luxurious houses in the place of the old dilapidated but traditional houses of the Roma community and transferring most of the old residents, who could not afford to live in the renewed area, to the remote neighborhood of Taşoluk, on the outskirts of Istanbul. According to Erdemci, "Urban transformation in Istanbul began as a drive to carve out a place in the



Current view of the Taksim Square where tunnel diggings started a few months ago.

new commercial and financial geography that covers the whole globe. It corresponds to the adaptation of a Neo-liberal economic model after the 1980 military coup d'état. Promoting a social Darwinism that is expressed via the survival of the fittest principle, this model has been fashioned for Istanbul in line with free market ideology and global trends."

The reaction which has slowly built against Istanbul's transformation has also found an outlet for artistic critique in the Istanbul Design Biennial, which was organized for the first time last year by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV), also the founder of the Istanbul Biennial. The Design Biennial consisted of two separate exhibitions curated by two curators. Turkish architect Emre Arolat's curation, shown in the Antrepo within Istanbul's one and only modern and contemporary arts museum, Istanbul Modern's premises, dwelt upon the urban transformation process.



Poster announcing one of the demonstrations against Emek Theater's demolition. It reads: "we will not let it be pulled down."

With the title of "Musibet" which has meanings like plague, trouble and disaster, the show was a harsh blow targeted at the urban transformation as an 'act of contractors' from an architect's point of view.

More plagues to be suffered

Shortly after, the Sulukule example was followed in Tarlabasi neighborhood, in Beyoglu district, which similarly contained a considerable Roma population mixed in with Kurds and other immigrants. The Tarlabasi area is still under construction amid dispute and legal action. Unfortunately, while both a local court and the European Court of Human Rights ruled against Sulukule's transformation, this was tragically after demolition and re-construction was finished. The largest amount of media coverage, however, was received by a historical movie theater, called Emek Theater, when it was announced as a renovation area in accordance with

the same law article. The winner of the bid proposed the theater's demolition and replacement with a shopping mall, which took everyone by surprise because the law article that gave way for the project suggested "protection of the cultural wealth by renovation," not demolition. What seemed like a cold joke took the form of disgrace when the construction company proudly announced they were not demolishing the theater but "moving it up" with the same technique as the famous La Scala was lifted to allow an additional ground story for shops and restaurants. However, in the Istanbul theater, what was planned to be done was complete demolition by simply moving the original wall decorations to its new location on some remote corner of the third or fourth floor. The Istanbul Chamber of Architects took almost all of the cases to law, but in this final case the IKSVM also took an active part and made a call to the authorities to be given the opportunity to undertake the renovation of the Emek Theater. The authorities remained totally silent to the call. Right next to the Emek Theater's lot, there is Demiroren Shopping Mall, separated from the theater by a small alley, which stands unabashedly on the unacknowledged graves of Taksim's two other historical theaters. This one and only shopping mall in the area seems more than enough for the needs of the people living or frequenting the area, since, as a keen eye will easily observe, it seems not to have reached the visitor rate it had hoped to attain. As an area consisting of a long pedestrian street with several stores, cafes and restaurants lining both sides, the whole spirit of Taksim resides in a visitor's possibility to walk up and down as he/she wants and to enjoy what he/she experiences en route. The lonely Demiroren Shopping Mall seems to receive the highest visitor rates during high tourism season and mostly by tourists from wealthy Arab countries. Obviously, this is not because of their search for local merchandise but more likely the result of the continuation of their own cultural habits. Seriously lacking the capacity to analyze public needs and demands, the municipal authorities might be tragically misguided by the sight of tourists going in and out of the mall. This misguidance is likely to have been triggered by a stronger interest in the contents of their purses than the benefits of the neighborhood, and thus has been translated into the desire for more and more

shopping malls. "The dream as expressed through the power party's "Istanbul is ready, target 2023" slogan is tinged with the spirit of an Ottoman revival that started in the 2000s and projected Istanbul as a future center of the Muslim world by 2023. This foresees Istanbul as a conflation of styles which is to result in a visual and urban culture that is somewhere in between Dubai and Singapore," according to Erdemci. With this slogan, the Esenler neighborhood, which consists of shanty town settlements, was taken under the widest-range of urban transformation. The process kicked-off with a ceremony which Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan personally attended and literally pushed the button that would detonate the bombs inserted in the first building that was to be brought down. It was a property owned by the national defense ministry used as temporary lodgings for military personnel. The shanty town is still under construction. As Erdemci says, "Creating economic vitality and extra employment, the regeneration of the cities and transformation of the housing sector has been an antidote globally for ongoing financial crises. However, in each crisis, Istanbul has become not only physically bigger, but also more densely populated through increased immigration waves. This period saw the legalization and transformation of shanty town houses (the ad hoc settlements of the immigrants/non-citizens or "barbarians") into multi-story blocks (repeating the same construction qualities of the shanty town houses) and their incorporation into the formal real estate market. These neighborhoods have become the epicenter of Neo-liberal urbanism." The urban transformation procedures are not limited to Istanbul, but, it is in this glamorous city that it has received the harshest criticism. As the contents of this article also reveal, the urban transformation of Istanbul goes on in two threads: first is the transformation of the cultural heritage that has long been neglected and left to decay, by replacing it with luxurious residences, hotels and shopping malls; and second is the transformation of shanty towns into more pleasing, better-looking, better structured and infrastructured residential areas. Apparently the same application targets two completely different architectural structures which may even be seen as two binary opposites within an urban environment. There is a third thread to the process which pretends to



Front view of Demirören shopping mall. Protestors demonstrated against possible demolition of the Emek Theater by gathering in front of the Demirören Shopping Mall on İstiklal Street.

be interventions targeting public safety and ease, but latently seek satisfaction of the same capital-oriented interest. Examples include: the ongoing transformation of Taksim Square which aims for the complete pedestrianization of the whole square by transferring the traffic flow to underground tunnels; and the project for a second canal next to the Bosphorus for the passage of gigantic vessels with hazardous content in order to prevent any catastrophe in its ancient peer (like what happened in the Mexican Gulf last year), a project which was originally defined by the prime minister as “a crazy project” in his press conference for the promotion of the idea! The crazy canal project also foresees new land development opportunities, new luxurious residential areas “with sea view,” and a second overpriced Bosphorus line. The Taksim pedestrianization project aimed to replace the Gezi park in the square with an ambivalent “culture complex with shops and restaurants”, which is

an indirect way of saying “a shopping mall with movie theaters in it”. A High Court annulled the park project but the tunnel diggings are still continuing.

“Currently, there are approximately 48 mega urban transformation projects in development including a “crazy” canal project next to the Bosphorus (two new cities, each to house one million people), a third bridge across the Bosphorus and further opening up of the forest, agriculture and water basin areas in the north of the city for new settlements are also planned. Two of the projects are emblematic of the spatial politics underlying the whole transformation process and have been the direct focus of political demonstrations. For example the transformation of Taksim Square and the construction of a new assembly ground for political rallies at Yenikapı, the designs of which suggest the fear of the assembly of people, an agoraphobic policy. Does this translate to a fear of public speech, freedom

of expression and fear of alternative political public forum? This is one of the questions we will be seeking a reply for,” Erdemci said.

Turkey went through a constitutional change in 2010 and the constitutional foundation of the urban transformation law was silently built into this constitutional package. Apparently, the Turkish majority voters who ambitiously voted to kick the military and its political interventions out, unwittingly voted the constructors in. According to the ongoing urban transformation practices, those in power seem to be envisaging an Istanbul of their own with little consideration for what the public needs or wants. With such exclusion from the municipalities’ grandiose schemes, all Istanbul residences become barbarians. This is an ironic reenactment of the xenophobic enmity of the whole western world in face of the Ottomans, this time occurring in the latter’s beautiful capital and made by their grandsons to their peers. This being the case, by taking Istanbul, and especially certain neighborhoods such as Tarlabasi, Sulukule, Fener-Balat or Basaksehir as a case study, commissioned projects in the upcoming Istanbul Biennial will explore such transformation processes which provided very little room, if any, for grassroots, or ground-up negotiations. As Erdemci said, “From aesthetics (as in ‘creating a beautiful neighborhood’) to civility (as in ‘for a more civilized urban life’), the humanistic discourses of art and democracy have been appropriated, utilized and abused as the legitimization for all kinds of violent actions by the authorities (such as the removal of low-income citizens from the central locations of the city). The exhibition aims to scrutinize the overarching ‘common’ interests, ‘win-win’ situations and politics of representation to create a public domain, autonomous to official slogans and discourses, in order to be able to discuss the way we are governed and forced to live. Furthermore, it will reflect on ways art can act as an autonomous field and yet interfere with the social, political and economic changes in society.” Focusing on urban public spaces in Istanbul, the Biennial will use public buildings left temporarily vacant by urban transformation. These may include courthouses, schools or military structures, post offices, former transportation hubs like train stations, ex-industrial sites such as warehouses, dockyards and

the very contested Taksim Square and Gezi Park. “Furthermore, the hallmarks of current urbanism such as shopping malls, hotels and office-residential towers are considered as sites for artistic interventions. Due to the uncertainties related to the highly speculative nature of urban transformation in Istanbul, the allocation of these spaces is precarious. In this sense, the Biennial will experience what the city’s dwellers experience everyday: precarity,” said Erdemci.

ABOUT CURATOR FULYA ERDEMCI

As a curator and writer, Fulya Erdemci, who was the director of the Istanbul Biennial (1994-2000), was also the director of Proje 4L in Istanbul (2003-2004) and worked as temporary exhibitions curator at Istanbul Modern (2004-2005). She was invited to curate the ‘Istanbul’ section of the 25th Biennale of São Paulo ‘Metropolitan Iconographies: Cities’ in 2002 and joined the curatorial team of the 2nd Moscow Contemporary Art Biennial ‘Footnotes on Geopolitics, Market and Amnesia’ (2007). Erdemci initiated the ‘Istanbul Pedestrian Exhibitions’ in 2002, the first urban public space exhibition in Turkey that centred on the “pedestrian” and co-curated the second edition in 2005 with Emre Baykal. In 2008, Erdemci co-curated SCAPE “Wandering Lines: Towards A New Culture of Space”, the 5th Biennial of Art in Public SPACE in Christchurch, New Zealand with Danae Mossman, presenting the work of 25 international artists throughout the urban spaces of Christchurch city. She was the director of SKOR | Foundation For Art and Public Domain in Amsterdam between June 2008 and September 2012. Erdemci has served on international advisory and selection committees. She taught at Bilkent University (1994-1995), Istanbul University and Marmara University (1999-2000) and on Istanbul Bilgi University’s MA Program in Visual Communication Design (2001-2007). Erdemci was the curator of the 2011 Pavilion of Turkey at the 54th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale.